

*These poems are excerpted from Another Life, a longer sequence in which the adolescent speaker travels with his younger sister, aunt, and mother—who has cancer—from Buenos Aires to an ashram in India.*

*Susana, lotus flower*

My aunt Susana weighs three hundred thirty pounds  
my mother's eldest sister  
who wears bright muumuus printed tunics  
who keeps her hair cut short with highlights and paints shadow on her eyes  
and rarely leaves the house  
her house that smells of sandalwood two computers humming  
like wind and night  
Susana has no pets or children  
lives off her father butcher's son  
who fled the pogroms all the way to Argentina

Susana  
which means beautiful as a lotus flower

she had two knee replacements  
and then was hospitalized for her weight  
she didn't slim down her bones kept carrying  
they shrank her stomach with a belt the belt unfastened scratched her innards  
food crept up to her lungs  
but even so the ice cream flows inside her  
gold-papered chocolates tumbling down like black snowflakes

Susana  
which means beautiful as a lotus flower  
who's never without angels  
she buys angel stickers in bulk  
from stores in the Once neighborhood and gives them away she says god listens to me  
but her boyfriend Héctor lost weight and left  
her husband Aarón ran off with a man  
and her sister my mother has cancer  
she'll be up in the soaring stars someday  
like an angel

*Liliana, lily blossom*

My mother's five-foot nine  
she has big bones and bleach blonde hair  
white crinkle cotton dresses on blue-veined white skin  
skin sweet with perfume  
and draped with necklaces she wears at home  
our house of grass-green carpets our house without flowers  
in Once where our neighbors' heads are covered  
because god's up there above it all  
though I'm not sure about my mother's god

her name is Liliana  
which means beautiful as a lily blossom

her grandmothers Fanny and Zelda were sisters  
they could read the future in coffee grounds  
and they knew everything about you from your birthday they were famous  
they traveled far their customers were high-ranked officers important people  
they hoped my mother would inherit their gift  
but she's a therapist  
receives her clients in the living room  
and sees things sometimes  
sometimes at night she pulls my covers off like something's wrong  
and sometimes she walks backwards  
like something's wrong

Liliana  
lily blossom

my mother left Gerardo her first husband  
she fled at night that's the way those things happen  
she took the first black cab she saw  
it was my father the tiller Aeolus pushed him  
they married with me in her belly named me Daniel  
but in the end my father left a knife clutched in my mother's hand  
and now her parents ask her to remarry they want her house to have a man in it again  
Ricardo her latest boyfriend's not around we don't know why  
he lives in Avellaneda  
he's a blacksmith

like the lily  
Liliana

we live  
many lives she says  
our souls are old or damp and cool as flowers  
and when you die god thrusts your head into the river  
and you forget it all  
you're light in the sky in the stars  
in an orchard circled by hedges stately trees

pear and apple and fig trees their branches always heavy  
and apple follows apple and pear follows pear  
each yields to the other  
delicious fruits  
that offer myriad delights  
and god thrusts your head into the river  
you come back as a tree  
an animal

I'm eleven  
I'm drinking orange juice with my mother in a coffee shop  
I think I won't remember her  
won't recognize her if I see her in another life  
don't be like that souls travel as a group yes even in the stars  
they change I might become your grandson or your cousin imagine that  
a dog of yours a spider in its web  
a flower blooming on the terrace

Liliana  
like a lily blossom

Estela morning star  
is a friend of my mother's she lives in San Miguel  
her street is lined with palm trees she has dogs and chickens  
she cleans  
my mother's energy  
and lays her hands onto my mother's vengeful cells  
and reads the planets  
as my sister and I play with the dogs  
and she says  
my father will come back  
come back from Ciudad Oculta the land of exile where he lives  
with Analía the one who never rests  
that barren land that isn't his  
so now on Sundays  
my mother calls Jorge we visit monks  
and go to Rosario to see Ignacio the priest born in Ceylon and father Mario in González  
Catán  
and the universal church of the kingdom of god  
where the pastor leads you up to the altar  
and the evil spirits disappear

*Sai Baba*

A cobra  
in the bedsheets of the boy  
among palm fields and rice fields  
the soundless cobra with the cosmos printed on its neck  
the king of snakes  
curls in the cradle of Sathya Narayana Rayu  
the son of farmers  
in a town of stone and straw in Puttaparthi

he speaks to animals  
to pigs and zebras to the rats and dogs running in the field  
one day he faints into a ditch what bit him  
he's different when he wakes  
he sings in Sanskrit now sometimes he laughs or weeps out of the blue  
he talks about fruit trees that no one's ever seen  
and calls for rites because the gods he says  
are moving through the sky right now

an exorcist  
slaughters a pheasant and a lamb  
he sits him down and draws a ring of blood around him in the field  
he shaves his head he slashes him  
and cleans his wounds  
with lemon juice and garlic but Rayu won't speak  
his father is afraid he grabs a stick he screams you're crazy  
you're either a ghost or a god

one morning  
he gets up and calls for his family  
he gives them fruits and flowers he pulls out of the blue and he says  
I'm the reincarnation  
of the holy Muslim fakhr  
my lineage and my clan are sacred I am  
Sai Baba  
divine father divine mother

*I wake up in India*

3 a.m.  
the alarm goes off  
I slip out silently so I  
won't wake my mother at this hour  
when sleep still nestles in her head  
and in the heads of birds  
I know how to get to the temple and I know the gods  
still as fig trees along the path  
bound to the world with roots  
no lights are on in Baba's house  
the phone booth's closed the canteen where I eat alone  
the sound of crickets  
and my strange crackling steps  
crumple the silence  
and the distance though there are others now  
all dressed in white sitting in rows and waiting for the doors  
of the mandir to open  
hours from now  
my mother says I get up early  
so god will hear me first  
but what I like is one leg crossed over the other  
the tingling in my hands my arm asleep  
as the birds wake  
and the day glows all over  
and everything's so calm I almost don't know why  
I'm here  
an ant in the sequence of ants  
the doors open  
with the first ray of sun  
we file into the temple we're led to sing to call to god  
five ohms through the nose eyes ears skin and tongue  
through the feet anus penis hands and throat  
through the air that lives inside the body  
through what enfolds the body  
and one last ohm for me  
shanti shanti shanti

*silence*

this is what speaks when no one speaks

what does it sound like  
the jug of the mind  
a stream of rain of birdsong  
that twig of sense along the border of my bowl in the canteen  
and if I move  
and if walk up to the current  
it's the rustle of flowers the stone that breaks the surface of the water  
the name as brilliant as a clearing in the woods of noise  
or more concretely an American  
who speaks a phrase almost in Spanish

this is what speaks when no one speaks

when my mother tripped on a mound of dirt  
and wrenched her foot  
we took a rickshaw she exposed her swollen ankle  
and the man brought us to the clinic  
the waiting room is full  
we're the only ones dressed in white people come up to us  
they look concerned about my mother  
they speak in Hindi in Sanskrit what is it they speak  
to become this oracle  
who answers a question  
that I don't want to ask myself that no one asked

this is what speaks when no one speaks

I was in the mandir  
waiting for Baba to come out the sun had risen  
and then a language spoke to me  
coarse as the voice  
who's turned into a tree and still has lips  
the old man with ebony skin  
no flag around his neck  
drew in a long thin thread of breath blew out a tiny ball without an aftertaste  
and looked at me as if to say it's your turn now  
forget about what brought you here  
your school your friends the girl you like your other life

this is what speaks when no one speaks

and the fingers of the day wake up the sky  
and wash its eyes of fog  
and everyone moves toward the temple doors they want to get there first  
like the wind  
when it brings the murmur of the waves all dressed in white  
who rise and hurry to the shore  
with open mouths

like lava lighting up  
a monkey in the jungle  
that's how the faithful show themselves  
before the sight of god

and the man filling bags with ashes  
under the eaves shaped like an insect wing  
he shovels cosmic ash  
into each bag  
beneath an insect wing

like crickets singing to the night  
huddled in nothingness  
in a force field of sound  
that's what mantras are like  
like crickets  
everywhere

the goddess looks at me  
from her glass box  
with all her heads  
five heads stuck to each other  
she trails me with her open  
eyes as I make my way to the temple  
at three in the morning

and the gods are there watching us  
and the gods are there watching us

all day  
my voice hid in my throat  
like a mouse  
in a dresser  
a knot of silence in my throat

like ghosts  
those glints of tooth and hair  
the girls from school  
I jacked off when I was supposed to nap  
it's been a long time since I've seen them and now  
they're glints of tooth and hair

it was still dark  
I sat down on my folding chair  
and waited for the temple doors to open  
and now it's day  
I sing and call to god  
he comes

*is this what sacred means?*

the head dipping into the river  
in this orchard of fruit trees  
of flowers and birds with no name  
cows resting in the shade  
my father's Taunus  
newly washed the engine running  
is this what sacred means  
the burned dung ash streaked on my forehead  
the vessel moving across the night  
the gods hiding in the fields  
the smell of livestock in the afternoon in Mataderos  
my mother  
coming toward me like a dog a spider in another life  
the heads of god that watch me  
Sai Baba dressed in orange making something manifest  
the island of Aeolus  
where Ulysses disembarked where my grandfather was born  
and washerwomen shining in the valley with their sheets  
my nine-year-old sister in her white kurta  
and the monkey who pulls her hair  
is this what sacred means  
the coconut just cut down from the tree  
my aunt with all her angels  
the cabs the maps the boys hauling luggage  
the footsteps of the gods across the sky  
is all of this what sacred means  
my mother's cancer  
this lineage of leaves the wind disperses and returns  
the smoke from the meat  
the engines rumbling like stars